

Preface - Perceiving living conditions between social place and socio-economic space

Academic training in the field of geographical development research requires a sound basis in theoretical concepts and methodologies for explaining differences and gaps in well-being of human communities, a critical reflection about the scope and range of development practice and its strategies for implementation. However, studying in the secure environment of a university campus and its libraries linked to the outer world by internet connectivity cannot provide for personal experience, being exposed to participant observation and becoming involved in defining a personal viewpoint at certain locations.

Consequently, the Master programme in geographical development studies at our department is based on two pillars. First, a critical understanding of the genesis of development research and practice is needed in order to understand present approaches, concepts and fashions. Second, the conceptual insights and findings need to be grounded and embedded in real life situations. At the Centre of Development Studies in the Freie Universität Berlin the focus is on a certain region that could be described as Central and South Asia, or Crossroads Asia. Regional expertise and thematic knowledge about communities and societies, economic paths taken, historical embeddedness of contemporary developments, ecological properties and environmental frame conditions form the spatial and place-based fundament for designing empirical courses. In recent years such projects were executed in India, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where the lecturers of our team had long-standing contacts and thorough fieldwork expertise. In every case a certain thematic constellation formed the starting point for our investigations that were carried out by small groups of junior experts and participants of the Masters programme. We have simulated situations that are similar to those challenges international development consultants are confronted with when being asked to give advice on a short-term assignment. The latter part we have abridged and constructed a set-up that asks for designing a manageable research approach to serve the objectives of the common endeavour, broken-up into particular themes. The challenge for all participants has been to implement in a real life situation the abstract conceptual frameworks that were devised, discussed and refined during a preparatory course. The expected outcome was a logical projection of the designed research questions into a given local socio-economic space constructed of a community and/or a social place. The attempt to apply everybody's research design to a specific research question was expected to result in empirical findings based on that analytical approach. In certain cases when the results are of interest beyond the educational purpose of learning how to do fieldwork and how to convert the findings into a scientific text it might be justified to share the results with a wider readership, as is the case with the papers presented in this report.

The three-semester long project was implemented in Varanasi in close cooperation with Prof. Rana PB Singh and his colleagues and students from the Department of Geography at Banaras Hindu University and with the help of a number of established contacts in the city. We could form nine mixed groups of people with local knowledge and orientation that paired with a couple of students each from the Berlin team. The thematic focus was

directed on 'Making a living in Varanasi - social place and socio-economic space'. Beyond Varanasi's attraction as a holy pilgrimage destination and place for worship we primarily looked at professions and locations that provide opportunities for making a meagre living by hard work. Consequently, certain trades and professions, groups and communities, individuals and office-bearers who kindly allowed us to observe, follow and sit with them during their working hours and to visit them at home contributed to form a selective mosaic of living conditions in Varanasi. All nine contributions in this volume are based on the findings from these joint-endeavours that were regularly discussed and re-adjusted during our bilateral discussions and plenary meetings at night in our temporary home in Varanasi. During a follow-up seminar back in Berlin the outcomes and results were again refined and processed to such a state that we could prepare the manuscripts in a manner that they fulfilled the formal requirements which a scientific journal would demand for.

The case studies begin with a paper by Ilias Dimakopoulos, Kunal Kishor Vivek & Marina-Elena Hey-ink that is devoted to the economy of paan which is analysed with an emphasis on governance and value chain considerations around the "paan dariba" in Kali Mahal, Chaitganj. The following case study by Celia Krauthausen, Jakob Kroneck & Valeska Mildenberger focuses on the urban quarter of Madanpura that has been dominated by saree weaving since generations, but where the local weaving industry has undergone significant transformations in the last decades. The division of labour and the organisation of cooperation along the production lines in the local handloom industry are investigated. Maike Metzkow & Hans Trebus devote their case study to economy of milk, one of the most important nutritional sources for the city population that has to be distributed in its fresh state to consumers. Rural-urban linkages and value chain analyses of milk are examined here. One of the most common opportunities to make a living in Varanasi is street-vending. The case study by Nina Brauneis & Nicolas Patt asks the question whether this is a strategy for new arrivals in the city or whether it could be the base for economic security. Melissa Bayer & Vanessa Holm connect commercial and spiritual considerations in their study on temple economies at Sankat Mochan, the most prominent Hanuman temple in Varanasi. Julia Fülling & Juliane Meyer studied the interesting case of the Muslim shrine Ghazi Miyan that has a local importance for Alai Pura and draws numerous visitors from different religious beliefs and orientations far beyond the neighbourhood. The case study by Eva Bunn, Sarvesh Kumar & Laurenz Virchow has a multi-local scope as they followed the washermen to several locations in town and participated in heated debates about caste politics, community representation and administrative plans and responses. Lisa Maria Klaus & Bianca Möckel attempted to understand social relations in a dom sweeper neighbourhood and studied transformations and re-orientations. Anubhav Dubey, Janaina Nunes Muniz & Tim Polster have succeeded in adopting an interesting conceptual approach for their analysis of life as politics in Durga Kund, known as a Chamar Basti. All case studies revealed certain aspects that have contributed to perception of making a living in Varanasi that is characterised by numerous strategies and a faceted and flexible approach to counter competition and to face administrative interventions.

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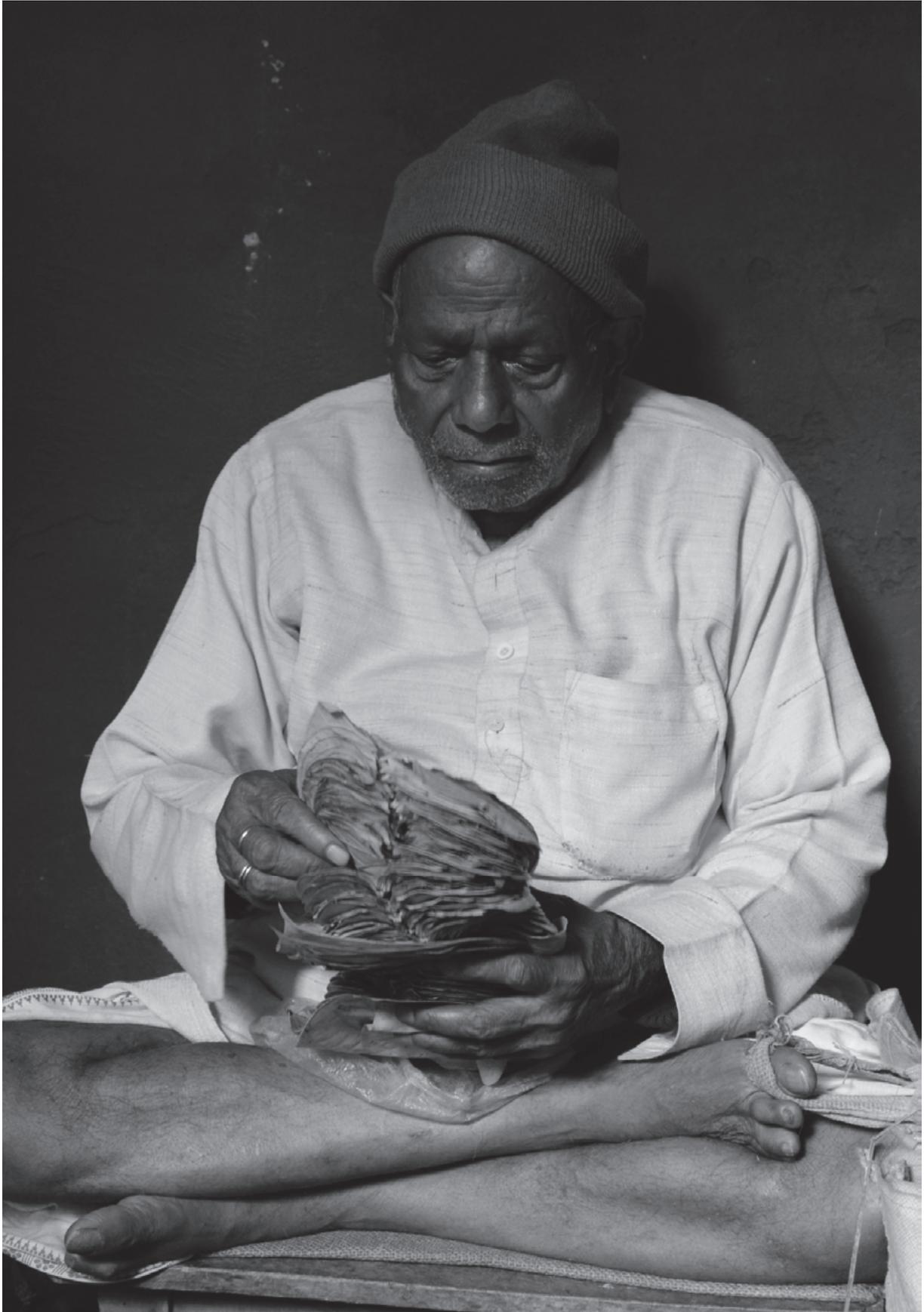


Fig. C: Paan leaves are counted several times in front of potential buyers (Schütte 2015)